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LILITH
THE QUEEN OF THE NIGHT
AND HER INFLUENCE ON FEMINISM

Lilith – The Queen of the Night and her influence on Feminism

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“Lay under me woman”, Adam said.

But she refused.

I dedicate this paper to all oppressed women out there, reminding them that the first woman alive was the most equal and the most feminist of all.

“I will be myself and not another!”

“I will be what I mean myself now.”

“I would do after my nature.”

“I will do as my Self pleases—as my Self desires.”

“I will do what I will to do.”

“I am what I am; no one can take from me myself!”

“Another shall not make me!”

“No one ever made me. I defy that Power to unmake me from a free woman!”

Lilith – George Mad Donald

Introduction

This paper is about the particular and fascinating case of Lilith, the first wife of Adam, the vampire, the witch, the Queen of the night, the dark monster, the demon, the half-human female creature [Hoffeld, p. 432] and so many other names we can find for her, 'she of many names' [Von Stuckrad, p.8]. The purpose of this paper is a deeper look into Lilith as an influential woman to the creation of Jewish, and not only, feminism. Based on that same Jewish myth and old and new references, I would like to show how crucial that first woman was in fact for the position of women during history, and how did a myth manage to establish a certain background for feminism.

I chose this subject because I have always been fascinated and amazed by the figure of Lilith since a very young age. Not only because of the surprising idea that Eve was not the first women created after all, but also because of all the mysticism myths following Lilith around. My first contact with Lilith was when as a child I read the superb fantasy novel 'Lilith' by George MacDonald, and it was exactly when my interest started to grow. It was then when I first realized that there are many things to investigate behind this dark figure. Other than that, scholarly speaking, Lilith is a much less investigated subject than others so I would really like to go deeper, mostly by comparing existing theories about her connection with the view of women nowadays.

As I mentioned earlier I will use old and new material, which means I will be based on scriptures and myths to draw Lilith's image for a brief presentation of who she was, and then books and articles on <Jewish to start with> feminism and sexuality, the position of women and the interpretation of Lilith's influence. My starting point though, would be the novel of MacDonald and the various interpretations through articles written about it, concerning its feministic –as demonstrated- tone. For the rest of my paper I will be mostly based to J. Plaskow's work, a feminist theologian who totally changed the views about Lilith, transforming her from an evil creature to a role model for women.

My main way of approach will be the comparison. Even though it is not a requirement to contribute something radically new and original to the existing scholarship, I will try to create a 'dialogue' with the scholarship, underlining common points to defend Lilith's importance for the Role of Women nowadays. As mentioned, my approach would be comparative, which means after studying different views on Lilith and Feminism, I will try to find the common point and show that she has been very influential indeed. A sure thing though, that anybody can clearly see even without a comparative essay, is how inspirational has Lilith been, in art and culture –inspiration as a dark figure or as a feminist pioneer.

Main Part

Presentation: Who Lilith was and her relationship with Adam and Eve – A Jewish Myth

The Medieval Myth of Lilith was first included at the Alphabet of Ben Sira (called 'Pseudo Sira' from some scholars), where she appeared to be Adam's first wife, before Eve [Bitton, p.37]. The Alphabet of Ben Sira 'was one of a great number of Jewish mystics, called Kabbalists, who tried to achieve a more intimate and personal relationship with God, especially through a better understanding of the circumstances of creation' [Hoffeld, p.433]. Even though the date is not very exact, we do know that it is a medieval text (printed for the first time in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 1514 – Bitton, p. 38), initially with a satiric tone, from an anonymous medieval author [Bitton, p. 37] and somehow vulgar [Bitton, p. 49] with purpose to make fun of a woman trying to defend her rights [Bitton, p.37]. Of course there are different versions of the story with slight alterations, and multiple aspects and added details, but the core always remains the same.

As the text mentions, Adam and Lilith were equals because they were both created from the earth [Alphabet of Ben Sira, 23a-b]. According to Ben Sira, Adam's companion wasn't created from his ribs as mentioned in the Bible [Genesis, 2, 18] but from the same earth, like him. Also, Lilith was designated by God as 'coruler' of the creatures of the earth, same as Adam [Hoffeld, p.433]. Starting as a sexual superiority (Lilith refused to let Adam be on top during sexual intercourse as she considered them equals), Lilith tries to defend her position as equal which makes her appear like an 'abnormal' woman who doesn't submit to the Law [Bitton, p.40]. The myth goes on by saying that Lilith left Eden as she couldn't prevail and this is when and how she became a demon, killing infants and seducing men in their sleeps, taking their sperm to create new demons. Adam, according to Ben Sira, actually wanted to keep his first wife that is why he pleads to God for that, but Lilith didn't want to return because nothing would change [Bitton, p.41] and because she slept with the Great Demon. The Ashkenazi tradition adds another element, 'Adam's anger', another way of showing his authority.

There are no many other sources besides the Ben Sira to confirm this Jewish Myth but there is a reference of Lilith at the Chronicles of Jerahmeel [p.138] which names her 'the first Eve', who at some point returned and slept with Adam while he was already with Eve. It is difficult in the end to determine if the association between Lilith and the first Eve existed before the Ben Sira, or if there were references elsewhere too such as at the Zohar [Bitton, p.47].

The Bible on the other hand doesn't refer to such person as 'first Eve' or 'first wife of Adam' or even 'Lilith' herself as it states 'Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.' [Genesis, 3:20]. At the same time though, there is another reference in the Bible: 'So God created mankind in his own image, in

the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.' [Genesis, 1:27] which leaves margins for further interpretations as in who is this female created together with Adam? Is it Eve, or maybe Lilith?

The Alphabet of Ben Sira was innovative at its time, not about the sexual quarrels, but mostly about creating a new plan of equality between the two genders [Bitton, p. 46]. This medieval myth became quickly very known and popular, especially because even the Bible may have insinuated some sort of equality [Genesis, 1:27]. Apparently, the refusal of Lilith concerning the sexual act is a metaphor, an allegory, as this whole myth, to point out the need for social equality of the two genders meaning the end of the patriarchal superiority of the Jewish society in the Medieval Times. [Bitton, p.48]. The Alphabet of Ben Sira, even though provocative and probably misogynist work [Lesses, 'Lilith'], suggests a female revolt against the male superiority, starting the construction of a new feminine identity' [Bitton, p. 50], 'picking up biblical elements and combining them with humorous criticism of rabbinical thinking' [Von Stuckrad, p.10]. With this Jewish Myth as a starting point, we are going to see and analyze in the next chapters of this essay how a new social phenomenon appeared with the purpose of more equality and respect of both sexes with their own particularities and specific aspects.

George MacDonald's Lilith – From fiction to reality

As mentioned at the introduction the main motivation for this paper was George MacDonald's novel, 'Lilith', so it might be useful to elaborate a bit more on that since it is actually between the Jewish myth and its feministic development, as it is said to have a feministic tone. Based on the novel itself and on the critical review of John Pennington <a very interesting article with references and comparisons with other authors and their views about this literary work of MacDonald's>, we can see some interesting facts, important about the whole story and the figure of Lilith. Even though it is a fantasy novel, a story coming from MacDonald's imagination, it is based indeed on the original myth, which is why it created many debates and different interpretations.

As it comes out from the study of the book, maybe the problems of women's authority and position in society didn't really start with the sin of Eve, but because of Lilith's actions [Pennington, p.1 – mention to Gilbert and Gubar]. The mysterious figure of Lilith makes the book problematic, as Pennington mentions [p.2], mostly because we have to see it as a 'metaphor' and not as an actual story, like the Jewish myth. In this metaphor, MacDonald shows the dark side of Lilith, her power, her position to society, the tension and the submission, and how her figure and her story influenced all women by becoming the 'negative transformation of female purity' [Pennington, p.3].

MacDonald though, ends up showing the good coming out of Lilith, even though she denies her own family, the patriarchy and God [Pennington, p.4-5], she manages to defend herself by refusing submitting to others. Lilith is a very strong figure, who needs no one and 'lives solely for herself' [Pennington, p.5], not under Vane (in the case of the novel) or Adam (in the case of the myth), or any man for that matter. So, maybe this is why men would describe her as a 'monster'? Because she won't submit to anyone but herself, probably. At some parts of the book, even MacDonald seems 'losing control' over her [Pennington, p.6] – maybe even normal for such a demonic creature.

MacDonald's book, as well as the Jewish myth of Lilith, makes us think about a number of oppositions: male/female, self/society, angel/monster, good/evil, passive/active [Pennington, p. 14 – critique by Deirdre Hayward] and so on. The question that rises is if those oppositions are leading us to a feministic view of Lilith. Is Lilith evil *because* she is female, or just because she happens to be evil? MacDonald seems to be presenting male figures as 'bad', but it is not really sure that he is doing that to point out that masculinity itself is bad, so that feministic tone of the book we are discussing it is not based on that but mostly on the fact of the 'opposition between self and deity' [Pennington, p. 17 – critique by Deirdre Hayward].

Of course, MacDonald's work is a literary work, that anyone can give the interpretation they think. It is based on the imagination of the author, and is purely fictional. But, in this case, the starting point is an actual Jewish myth, and considering the time the novel was written, we can come to some conclusions about feminism at that

particular time. Another important fact, is the Christian view MacDonald presents through his novel, analyzing God's love and forgiveness, and independently from ethics the most important element for him is the initial Myth and the symbols of the story [Makis Panorios – Preface at the Greek Edition of George MacDonald's 'Lilith'].

From a demon to a feminist pioneer – A reinterpretation of Lilith's influence on Feminism

As mentioned many times and in all monotheistic religions, not only Judaism, gender, religious and social traditions and so, the position of women, were defined by men, making women 'the other' [Hellig, p. 38] and trying to 'discredit the Matriarchy' [Jewish Feminist Magazine – The Lilith Question]. In Judaism in particular, patriarchy was fundamental, starting from the Bible itself, making woman just a means of reproduction. So it is quite clear that women, the 'others', needed to invent a new identity in order to get a new view. This invention was Lilith. There is a point of view mentions at the Jewish Feminist Magazine that this particular story may have been invented by women and not men, told from mother to daughter during generations before reaching the Alphabet of Ben Sira, but this is just a –well based- speculation. Either way, Jewish men used Lilith's negative side to 'save' their manhood, as they thought. The real threat for them though was the Exile, not some female demon, but that makes Lilith a Diaspora creation [Hellig, p. 47].

Lilith's myth got quickly popular not only to Jewish circles but also among Christians in the medieval times [Hoffeld, p. 434], even though the interpretations may have varied. No other demon in Judaism fascinated people <and most of all men> so much as Lilith [Hellig, p. 41], probably because she was so powerful, independent, irresistible and went through the deepest male desires .

Lilith's popularity in our times led many scholars, and first of all Judith Plaskow, to take this medieval Jewish myth the same way George MacDonald did, from its feministic side. Plaskow, a Jewish feminist (even though she doesn't quite admit that fact for herself) theologian, within various works but most importantly 'The Coming of Lilith' (1972) she presents how Lilith, instead of being a reactionary monster, she is actually a suppressed woman that managed to vindicate for her freedom, becoming a admirable paradigm for all women in the world, struggling with oppression.

Plaskow presents the same story, with a feministic flair, a new, modern version of the old myth, adding historic and religious facts, suggesting that actually the relationship between Eve and Lilith was mostly a sisterhood relationship rather than hostile in any way [Plaskow, p.8], explaining that Adam probably lied to Eve and said Lilith is monster, when instead was a woman like her, very beautiful and strong. So Plaskow is basically transforming Lilith 'from a demon to a role model' [Lesses, 'Lilith']. Many scholars actually followed this view of Plaskow's; of Lilith being the incarnation of female power [Von Stuckrad, p.5]. Von Stuckrad for example, based on Jung and psychological theories, supports that with studying of the oldest documents concerning Lilith we practically reconstruct 'male' and 'female' [p.12]. As Von Stuckrad points out, patriarchal discussions usually generate 'assumptions about femininity' [p. 5]. The story of Lilith basically breaks the 'lower position attitude' and the 'religious archetype' [Von Stuckrad, p.5], erasing all stereotypes and patterns for women and their social position.

Besides, as Lesses points out, Lilith is not the only case of women gaining power and reinventing themselves through rituals [Lesses, 'Exe (o) rcising Power', p.344-349].

Of course the figure that helped more feminism to grow is Lilith's figure as a single woman and not as much the presence of 'liliths', as a group, which were female evil spirits in general [Lesses, 'Exe (o) rcising Power, p. 354]. I am clarifying this because it can be confusing thus there are references for 'male' liliths too [Lesses, 'Exe (o) rcising Power, p. 355]. It is the Lilith from the Jewish myth that affected the construction of women's image in society and not the lilith figures in general or any other combination. The lilith wasn't a very prominent figure in rabbinic texts and the figure of Lilith as Adam's first wife is post-talmudic [Lesses, 'Exe (o) rcising Power, p. 355], maybe that is why her myth was more influential, as more recent. This older image of women being evil witches in rabbinic literature, certainly changed in the text of Ben Sira, showing that maybe there is a good side out of it.

The influence of Lilith on the Jewish Feminism mainly started in the '70s, with Plaskow's work being crucial as mentioned (written in 1972). She translated the Ben Sira myth rewriting it in a way to show how women (should) refuse to give in to male power. Of course many other works followed the one of Plaskow, but hers was the one that with its allegorical story started moving things around. This is how, in 1976, the Jewish Feminist Magazine was founded, with Plaskow being a contributing editor. The initial goal of the magazine was to put Jewish women's issues into the Jewish Community's agenda, in order to give Jewish women a better chance of co-existing and socializing. It was a very strong feminist move at the time; 'independent, Jewish and frankly feminist' as its motto was and still is.

Plaskow's work and the creation of Jewish Feminist Magazine was the first chance for Jewish Feminism and later on Feminism in general to go a step forward, by rising the 'Lilith Question' – of course the myth of Lilith was just the trigger of this interesting development. Lilith's struggle for equality was the initial motive, and her will to fight for a good cause [Jewish Feminist Magazine – The Lilith Question] was the inspiration for all Jewish women. A long time passed from the Exile period to Modern Times, when women were finally enabled to fight for their equal position to <Jewish> society. So perhaps this image of Lilith, decisive, courageous and strong woman, who fights male superiority and vindicates her equality to men, can keep Jewish women's fight for equal rights alive [Hellig, p. 49].

Conclusion

The time of Lilith

In Judaism, and all monotheistic religions, women's voices were always represented by men. This is why the interpretation of the role of genders in Judaism and vice versa (the importance of Judaism in the construction of gender) is not enough, from the male point of view, but the real women's voices must be heard, as in biblical texts that represent those actual female voices, such as Judith, Ruth and Deborah. In a traditionalistic religion like Judaism, where ancient texts still have a certain authority even to modern readers, a new and unanimous voice must be created in order to be heard. In the case of Jewish Feminism that voice was Lilith's story.

It may seem weird how a myth can generate a change of the view of a social group, but in the case of Lilith this is exactly what happened because 'Jewish Tradition is very flexible in role models' [Jewish Feminist Magazine – The Question of Lilith]. Reinterpreting the medieval myth, feminist scholars managed to change the stereotypes and present a new way of looking at the position of women in society. Gender construction is a very long procedure but sometimes there are facts that work like catalysts and a real change can happen gradually. Lilith, from a marginal character of a not so well known at the time medieval midrashic myth managed to get out of her silence, react, and show her real strength, empowering and inspiring Jewish women and women in general to do the same, and stop keeping quiet.

Dame, Rivlin and Wenkart, the editors of the anthology 'Which Lilith? Feminist writers re-create the world's first woman' are basically trying to deal with this ambivalence and balance out those two sides of Lilith, hence the title –which? The infant killing demon or the First Wife of Adam? In the end it is proven how a marginalized creature can be a contemporary heroine. In the case of Lilith traditional symbols become modern ones, applied in today's society, and Lilith becomes one of 'us' women struggling for our rights by expressing our own voice. The time of Lilith has come to help women articulate their own beliefs, their own views, not being afraid of showing who they are, defending their uniqueness.

Yes, indeed, it does seem weird how a traditional myth started this battle. But then again, in order to be heard, if we don't have a voice, we need to invent one.

*Below I quote the very to the point final statement of *Aviva Cantor-Zuckoff*, founding member of the Lilith Editorial Board, the Jewish Feminist Organization and the Socialist Zionist Union, about women and equality connecting with Lilith's myth – and the Bible:

'Jews have periodically created movements to "return to the source" of Judaism, and Jewish history is replete with such efforts. When we struggle for equality of woman and man and see Lilith as the personification of that struggle, we are part of this tradition of

returning to the source and building from its pure, uncontaminated foundation. This pure beauty is contained in the words “And God created the human species . . . man and woman created He them.” The equality of man and woman is embodied in that sentence. **This equality must be embodied in our lives if humankind and all the values we hold dear are to survive.’**

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